

Crossing Lines, Again

There is a priest in New York City who lives not in the church rectory but in a tenement apartment, and part of his ministry is inviting prostitutes to come in and clean up, to rest, to have a bite to eat.

It's an odd arrangement and plenty of folks are plenty cynical about what he's up to: from those figuring the priest is indulging in some free services to the pimps who don't want another man in the mix.

The respectable folks ostracize the priest and the pimps... beat him up.

Crossing lines is a hard thing to do.

I remember a couple of years ago a homeless fellow with mental issues soiled himself badly, and then wandered into our parking lot.

He smells to high heaven, but there's one of our elders in his Sunday best scrambling to get this fellow cleaned up, finding him some fresh clothes, and doing all of this as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Crossing lines is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And that's where Jesus takes us this morning.

It's important to get what the scene is here in order to see what's actually going on.

When you first hear about this gal's 5 husband's you might think she's the Samaritan version of Elizabeth Taylor or Zsa Zsa Gabor — two old time actresses well known for their many husbands.

But context is everything, and in the case of our Samaritan woman, there's not a chance that she is some heartbreaking man-eater who changes husbands like she changes underwear.

In those days, only a man can divorce a woman.

And in those days, a woman without a man is usually in trouble, since there are so many limits on who she can associate with, how she can earn a living.

The fact is, this gal is probably someone who cannot have children — barren they call her — and the reason she's at the well in the middle of the day, all alone, instead of coming with a group of women in the cool of the early morning, as one

would expect in such a traditional culture, well — no one wants to catch what she has.

You know the story.

Someone has a string of bad luck, and folks who know about it tend to stay away, not wanting her bad luck to rub off on them.

With 5 men who dumped her, and a 6th who won't go to the trouble of marrying her, you don't need Dr. Freud to tell you that this is one hurting lady.

Which poses a problem for Jesus.

Because not only did Samaritans and Jews hate each other, seeing each other as terrible heretics, but a Jewish man was simply not permitted to talk story with a Samaritan woman.

Which is why she is shocked when Jesus crosses the line and asks for a cup of water.

He asks for his need while at the same time knowing all about her need.

And while many folks think they hear Jesus talking about forgiving her sins when he's talking about the 5 husbands and the latest live-in, that's us putting a 21st century spin on it — and it's all wrong.

What Jesus knows about her is her shame — the shame that comes when we feel we don't measure up, even through no fault of our own.

And yet, sitting by that dusty well with Jesus, she begins to experience the unconditional love of God, as he assures her that whenever you worship in spirit and in truth, that's when the living God finds you!

And then she seems to see that maybe this is the one — and Jesus responds to her insight using the same words that Moses hears from the burning bush when he asks God to name himself: as God from the bush says to Moses, so Jesus says to this woman: "I am...."

Sitting atop a deep well in the heat of the noonday sun, engaging a woman whose poor luck has left her alone and ashamed..... the fullness of God smiles.

Maybe that's why she can drop everything, including her water jug, and run back to the town to share this crazy, ridiculous, marvelous news: that no matter who I am,

no matter what my life is like, no matter the curses I secretly believe God has cursed me with, no matter my shames or secrets or lies, in the face of all of my broken humanity, God is here, sitting right next to me, knowing me more intimately than I know myself, knowing everything I've ever thought, felt, fantasized, done or hoped to do, and in the midst of knowing me through and through, this God.....
LOVES ME!

Martin Luther always knew about this intimate knowledge God has of each of us, and for a long time, Luther HATED God for it.

It drove him crazy to think that no matter how hard he tried to be holy, he continually messed up, angry that there was no way to hide from this all encompassing God – until the day he receives the grace to see that God doesn't love us because we are good, God loves us because God is good.

Crossing lines allows Luther to see and embrace this fantastically undeserved, unexpected, unearned, truth: that we are, despite everything, accepted by God.

Crossing lines is what sends the Samaritan woman urging her townsfolk to "come and see," (the same invitation Jesus gives to the very first disciples in the very first pages of John's gospel)....

Crossing lines turns the life of that once lost Samaritan woman into the very first apostle - who - like Mary Magdalene at the tomb that Sunday morning – is sent by Jesus to announce the good news that she has seen and heard.

Crossing lines is what it means to follow, and not just admire, Jesus.

We live in times that make it urgent for we Christians, perhaps more than ever before, to begin crossing lines so that the unity of humanity that our Lord calls us to can come alive once again.

Everywhere we look, it seems, smaller and smaller groups are splitting into opposing camps, seeing those who were once neighbors now as new found enemies.

More than ever, as followers of Jesus, you and I are called to make a daily practice of crossing lines for the sake of people everywhere, for the sake of God's good creation.

There is one last story, closer to home.

I don't know if you remember about 15 years ago the horrific murder here in town – a sailor killed his wife while making one of his three children watch.

After the sailor's arrest, the children were split up between three foster families.

A story about them ran in the morning paper, and a Muslim man, now living in Hawaii, and his caucasian wife, a native of Vermont, decided to adopt the boys.

Initially, the boys were all flunking school - Fs in every single class.

Today, after a decade of love and hard work and healing, the children are not only flourishing, but the eldest now attends MIT.

When I said to the fellow who adopted these children that, wow, you saved their lives ... he softly shook his head and smiled, saying, no, they saved mine.

Crossing lines is what it means to be a child of God.

And I suppose that's the way it must be, for after all, in Jesus, God crosses the most basic line, the line between the Creator and the created - the line between the divine and we who are formed of dirt and breath.

Jesus joins for all eternity... heaven and earth.

In Jesus, the God in whom we live and move and have our being comes to live and move and be with us, making it, if not safe, then at least possible, for us to cross lines for the sake of each other.

+amen